Of Women, Men, Rurality, and the “nameless, faceless”—gender-less?—Corporation: The Corporation (2003) and Martin Butler’s Poetry and Butler’s Journal (1889-1905)

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In February, 1905, in response to preferential treatment given a woman on account of her gender, New Brunswick poet, peddler, tannery worker, and editor Martin Butler (1857-1915) wrote that this “…mock chivalry toward women goes altogether too far. They are neither better nor worse than men, and should receive the same rights and suffer the same penalties.” These were the words of a political and social radical; a steadfast defender of workers’ rights; a condemner of what were, in his time, cross-border corporations; these were also the words of someone who, in his monthly newspaper as well as in poetry, proved a champion of rural life and a consistent, rurally-oriented challenger of the status quo where it concerned women and their rights and status in society.  

Martin Butler’s politics and persistent textual attentions on matters of gender, as evidenced by his poetry and journalistic writing from 1889 through the turn of the century, allow him to be given the labels of both “prophet of radicalism” and proto-feminist. Butler’s

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1 Butler’s Journal, February 1905. Butler’s Journal was published in Fredericton, NB: 1890-1915, but to date I have not located a complete 25 year run of the newspaper. University of New Brunswick Library, Microfilm Collection in Fredericton as well as the MacRae Library at Nova Scotia Agricultural College own the two five year runs of Butler’s Journal, beginning with volume 1 issue 1: July 1890-June 1895, and concluding with July 1898-June 1903. Additional non-microfilmed issues are the following in New Brunswick: Butler’s Journal [one issue, March 1898] in York Sunbury Museum, MC 300 – York Sunbury Historical Society Archival Collection, Clippings (MS19 – 20 to 103), Item no. 38; and at UNB Library Special Collections (originals) the following issues: August 1895, October 1895, November 1895, January 1896, April 1896, June 1896, July 1896, August 1896, September 1896, December 1896, January 1897, February 1897, March 1897, April 1897, May 1897, June 1897, June 1898, February 1904, August 1904, September 1904, November 1904, February 1905, September 1905, December 1905. Butler’s life is detailed in David Frank’s entry on Martin Butler in The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, 14 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1998), 164-66; his literary biography is found online in the New Brunswick Literary Encyclopedia at http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/nble/b/butler_martin.html.


3 Gerald H Allaby, "New Brunswick Prophets of Radicalism: 1890 1914." M.A. thesis. Fredericton: University of
writings on, and in, rural contexts, however, together with his experience of a corporation in a rural setting, also offer an entry point to an examination of women, men, rurality and the corporation, an examination made in this essay through a brief analysis of both this turn of the 19th century poet’s work and the 21st century documentary film, The Corporation.4

“The Peddler’s Story,” a poem published by Martin Butler in his 1889 book, Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches5, and the 2003 documentary, The Corporation, are, without question, unusual elements to put together and analyze. But I do so here in order to explore some theoretical terrain—terrain of interest, it is hoped, to researchers in the field of women’s and gender studies. Although the inquiry has been prompted by the critique of corporations made most recently in the ‘Occupy’ (Wall Street et al) movement, this cultural phenomenon will not be addressed in this essay, but its diverse and defuse elements of critique have resonated with many in both Canada and the U.S.6

The ‘Occupy’ movement’s critique of the locations and structures of power is strikingly similar to the critique found in the Canadian documentary film, The Corporation, a film made a decade ago. Both the film and the move recent ‘Occupy’ developments have been eloquent statements of protest against the undue power and influence had on human society by corporations, from Nike to Shell Oil and beyond. Still, in my view, both this film and the


5 The poem, “The Peddler’s Story,” by Martin Butler, has been available online but recently has become restricted; it is available in the University of New Brunswick library in microform and this citation is provided here: Martin Butler, “The Peddler’s Story: Or How I Lost My Arm,” Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches. Fredericton, NB: Gleaner Job Office, 1889. In Pre-1900 Canadiana Series, CIHM No. 00365, pp. 8-21.
more recent protests are, unhappily, incomplete critiques.\(^7\) Placing the emphasis here on the documentary as emblematic of the broader, contemporary, gendered culture of protest, I would argue that while the film offers a multi-focal approach to the subject matter of the corporation and the corporation’s pathological behavior, the film fails to articulate and critique the gendered realities of the monster it portrays the corporate form as being. The other blind spot, in my view, in this otherwise powerful documentary work of film-making, is *The Corporation*’s limited discussion of rurality and the natural world as well as the natural world’s intersection with these gendered realities of corporatization.

A both rural and gendered lens is needed to more adequately comprehend the historical and contemporary dimensions of women, men, and the corporation, especially in terms of rurality and the natural world’s role in these dimensions. The writings of Martin Butler offer one such a lens, though also an incomplete one, through his voice as well as the voices of countrywomen and men he featured in his poetry and prose at the turn of the last century. These writings, along with the insightful though limited analysis offered in the film, *The Corporation*, suggest that what has been taken by corporations—from women, men, and the natural world encompassing human society in a rural context—has a history that is long, continuing, infamous, and worthy of further study, critique, and correction.\(^8\)

**Countryside Gender Roles/Relations/Identities: “The Peddler’s Story”**

This essay needs to begin with a brief look at Martin Butler, a rural working class man, and at the countryside gender roles, relations, and identities experienced and expressed in his personal life as recreated in the poem, “The Peddler’s Story.” Martin Butler’s life—he was

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\(^7\) Other critiques have also appeared: see, for example, Campbell, Emahunn Raheem Ali, “A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier.” *Black Scholar* (Winter 2011) Vol. 41 Issue 4, p42-51.

\(^8\) Much work, however, has already been done in this regard: see, for example, Alistair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power* (London: Aurum Press, 2001).
born in the late 1850s, and died in 1915—spans the period of growth and legal change in status of the North American corporation. As The Corporation documentary outlines in its sketch of the history of this business form (with interviews from Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky and others), the corporation initially was structured to provide for a common good—to finance (and, in the process, make a small profit from) the building of public infrastructure, such as waterworks or railways. By the Gilded Age, the time period in which Martin Butler experienced the corporation’s effects in his own life, the state of Maine had corporations that had transformed from being largely family-run, geographically confined businesses to a globalized form that had achieved the status of a legal person in the U.S. The corporation thus shaped the 20th and 21st century world (and continues to do so today, according to the film makers of The Corporation, in all encompassing and destructive ways).  

In Butler’s case, it was a “family firm” The Shaw Brothers, of Massachusetts, which incorporated and then collected land, hemlock bark, and other assets and resources in a cross-border, globally-oriented corporation making boot and sole leather in the hinterlands of the U.S. and Canada. 

When Martin Butler was in his teens, the Butler family left their laboring life on farms and lumber camps in New Brunswick, and went to Grand Lake Stream, Maine. Their sojourn over the border from New Brunswick to Maine was not made on an idle whim, but was in response to newspaper advertisements that had been placed by the Shaw Brothers Corporation in the province of New Brunswick. The ads promoted the idea of jobs to be had

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in Maine, at the tanneries built and being built in rural villages and the deep woods of
downeast Maine. The monstrous technological and capital expansions made possible in the
Civil War and post-Civil War period were expressed in this rudimentary form of huge
amounts of leather being produced for the soles of shoes and boots, and on a larger scale and
more rapidly than ever before—and in the rural and remote Maine-New Brunswick
borderlands, where, as I have argued elsewhere, rural, working-class masculine identity was
an “ephemeral” identity, shaped by corporate capitalism as well as by the men themselves.
The logic of placing these huge factories in the woods and rural villages of Maine was one
connected to the eco-system and timber harvesting economics of the industrial capitalist
economy. It had to do with the bulkiness, at that point in time, of the chief ingredient for
tanning leather: tannin, made from the bark of certain trees. Oak had been used formerly as
a tanning agent, but oak was a higher value tree and also had become scarcer as the clear-
cutting of North America proceeded. Hemlock was a cheaper (de-valued), prolific,
understory species. Consequently, massive leather tanning factories were constructed in the
hemlock-rich, jobs-poor Maine woods in the early to mid-1870s. By virtue of expanded
industrialized meatpacking and transportation infrastructure, green (fresh, salted, untanned)
cattle hides were shipped from Chicago or Buenos Aires, to the woods of Maine, where
plentiful hemlock bark could be used to tan the hides and turn them into sole and boot
leather.  

The natural world of North America in this period was thus reshaped by the “harvest” of
timber, by out and out destruction. There occurred the final horrendous complete clear-

cutting, timbering and mining of areas in the Northeast and Southeast, cutting that forever altered landscapes and eco-systems in many places.\textsuperscript{11} The particular ecosystem of the North and Northeast is relevant here, for this is where the hemlock bark could be found, but what is equally important is that here was where cheap, but skilled labour could be had, along with the legal instrumentation to secure through purchase (or control through leases) huge hemlock-filled landholdings. The legal instrument of incorporation functioned so much better on the American side of the border, although Shaw Brothers, Inc., the corporation Martin Butler and his family encountered, eventually was incorporated on both sides of the border. The corporation used that borderland reality to their legal advantage until their inevitable financial “crash,” in 1883.

Before the Shaw Brothers failure, however, the Butler family and many other families as well as single men from outside rural Maine made their way to Maine (as well as other states and provinces) to these tanneries, in the wake of global economic downturns that were affecting job availability everywhere. Settling in the early 1870s in Grand Lake Stream, Maine, site of what was heralded at the time as the biggest tanning factory in the world, the Butler family initially prospered. But their prosperity was shortlived. Fire took their dwelling, and Butler’s father was injured in a fall at the tannery where he, Martin Butler, and Butler’s older brother John were all working in 1876. Then in December of that year, Butler suffered a horrendous accident at work in the bark mill one night. His right arm was so mangled it had to be amputated. Butler requested compensation from the company but was

refused. Seven years later, in 1883, Shaw Brothers, Inc., was declared insolvent and the failure left communities and workers on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border suffering huge losses in wages, unpaid debts and in other unmet obligations.

Butler, once he’d recovered from his accident, began a new life minus his right arm, working as a peddler and news correspondent, a part-time (and poorly paid, due to his being one-armed) tannery-bark mill worker where the mills were still managing to operate, and as a newsie and train boy. But he also began to write, and publish, poetry. In 1889, following what was to be a permanent relocation to New Brunswick, Butler self-published a collection of poetry. *Maple Leaves and Hemlock Branches* contained several clearly autobiographical works, including the long narrative poem, "The Peddler's Story."

The poetry in this book, but especially “The Peddler’s Story,” serves as an important additional source of clues to Butler's sense of himself as a working man and his milieu. Yet, the poem does not begin with “the peddler’s story”; instead, it explores the gender roles, relations and identities in a rural New Brunswick farm family, through the voice of a woman, the mother of a farm household, with whom “the peddler”—Martin Butler, or his persona—meets in his travels, following his industrial accident. The introductory sections of the poem, and in fact the majority of the poem’s stanzas, are narrated by this countrywoman:

Good day sir!—walk into the kitchen,

There sit down and take a rest;

A stranger is always welcome,

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Though my home is not the best.

And I ain’t got it tidied up or fixed
For strangers or company,
And Saturday is a busy day,
And there’s no one to work but me.

My girls have grown up and left me;
Two are away in the States,—
One is in Minneapolis,
And one at the Golden Gate.

While the poem is not the most skillfully rendered piece ever written by Martin Butler, its first 30, four-line stanzas provide a sketch of countryside gender relations, as the farm woman tells the peddler about her family, and the roles each family member plays within the household. For example, even a playful jibe between the farm household’s husband and wife, followed quickly by “We’d never a word between us/In all our mortal lives./And the children we’ve never ‘corrected’” (p. 19)… offer a glimpse into Butler’s politics and his later editorial writings on a number of issues connected with women’s equality, including the necessity of women and men considering the seriousness of the marriage relation, necessity of equality in the marriage relationship, the need for raising the age of consent, putting an end to prostitution, providing sex education for children, and extending the franchise to women. Martin Butler also did not confine his critique of gender roles to poetry; in many editorials he wrote in his Butler’s Journal
newspaper, which he founded in the provincial capital of Fredericton in 1890 (but sold consistently to subscribers whom he met while on his peddling rounds in rural New Brunswick), Butler criticized religious groups for their attacks on an ‘unwed mother.’

The poem, in its framing narrative, presents not a critique but a celebration, of a small, rural, farming family, a vision of a happier and more just society, rooted in what were in his view healthy inter-gender relations and non-conflictual gender identities, as well as male and female complementary/sometimes overlapping roles in the rural agricultural context. What the New Brunswick farm woman also talks about in the over forty stanzas that give her experience the predominant “voice” in Butler’s poem is that her perception that their world is a ”world of change” and a “degenerate age”—Gilded Age America—these are circumstances not limited to those impacted more directly or intellectually by corporate extractions of labour (human power) and capital (natural resources) in the urban context; these realities are felt as well from and in the countryside. Yet, still, the countryside provides somewhat of a buffer; the rural world allows for the negotiation of both gender identities and the social relations of gender and capital. “The Peddler’s Story” reveals the voice of a woman for whom change has wrought new opportunities for one of her daughters (through teaching) but change that she herself questions in terms of how much that opportunity is truly worth. She contrasts her own freedom of action within her “more free” latitude of life as a countrywoman in New Brunswick with what may, or may not be, the fate of her daughters who’ve married and are now in US cities facing urban and industrial realities.

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14 Butler’s Journal, March 1893.
Roles for this “old lady” within the countryside of rural New Brunswick included typical items for rural women in the 19th century, roles such as provisioning food, raising children, and seeing to the household chores. But, as has been pointed out in studies too numerous to mention, the gender roles of women expanded to men’s roles, such as helping in the fields when needed.16 As the farm woman asserts, life was more challenging during the pre-industrial days: (p. 9-10) “/I worked from morn till night,/Spinning, and weaving and scrubbing...And when I’d an idle moment/I’d have to work in the field,/For it took all the help we could muster/To get in the season’s yield.” A less-than-rigid division of labour is viewed perhaps in a nostalgic light, but one in which equality and good grace are in contrast to the harsh extractions of the factory on home and worklife. This, Butler reveals in the other part of the poem, in which Butler has the peddler telling his story to the farm woman, on how he came to lose his right arm and was forced to take up peddling:

I was working in the tannery
Up at the Grand Lake Stream,
A-grinding bark on a winter’s night,
They hauled it in with a team.

The night was cold and frosty
And the belting wouldn’t work,
But kept slipping around the pulley,
And I went to give it a jerk

To set it again in motion,
When I found that my arm was wound
In a cog-wheel, up to the shoulder,
And terribly crushed and ground.

And I was left there hanging
About six feet from the floor...¹⁷

**Gendering the Monster**

Butler’s depictions of his accident are striking, in that the rest of the poem focuses on the rural, agricultural portrayal of a harmonious farming family, where lives revolve around productive labor on the farm and the household that sustains the human inhabitants. This is in contrast to Butler’s stark depiction of the “hateful” place where a corporation maims a worker, kills another, creates but also disables a community, and forces a man into the peddling profession (and, Butler subsequently notes on p. 16-17 of the poem, where he was not compensated “a cent” by the Shaw Brothers, Inc., after the accident).¹⁸ But what is also noteworthy is that the site of this terrible accident has its harshness softened by a recollection of the beautiful hills of Maine and of the rurally-rooted people who were Butler’s co-workers and community members. Thus, the rural world and its human society provided

opportunities for a quality of life bound up in temporary escape from, or transcendence of, the ceaseless extractions of corporations.

The monster that the corporation has become in the 21st century has no such softening agent, but only elements of the seedy, the seamy, and the slick, as *The Corporation*, only briefly analyzed here, reveals. The film is a 23 segments youtube offering also available by download or in other forms from the filmmakers. The film suggests in its opening scenes and voice-overs that the corporation at this point in time is being both challenged and defended, a somewhat ahistorical observation and a surprising one, given the historical context provided in the film by historian Howard Zinn and others on the history of the legal instrument. The 2003 documentary draws from the book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, by Joel Bakan. Its observations on the pathologically destructive behavior of corporations in the contemporary context, though ahistorical and also predating the 2008 economic crisis, nonetheless are quite salient. Through images and metaphoric language the film makers critique corporations and corporate players: there is the Shell executive and his wife, who attempt civil conversations with protesters who show up at their house; there is the Nike CEO who’s never been to his corporation’s factories in Asia, where film maker Michael Moore offers to take him; and, there is the advertising executive who smiles in a way that can only be described as demonic as she observes, “You can manipulate consumers.... it’s a game.”

The film’s opening highlights the principal defence played out in the mass media over numerous corporate scandals predating the current global crisis, that, in sum, not all corporations are bad—there are just a “few bad apples.” The film’s use, in the opening

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19 The Corporation, Basic Training, 11/23.
scenes, of an apple-picking machine is quite apt and ironic, as today in Canada much of the fruit enjoyed on tables in North America is not machine harvested, but instead is picked by humans who do a great job of the task but do not benefit from their expertise as they are transported hither and yon through international/foreign worker schemes designed to keep food prices cheap in the illusory land o’ plenty (found in the supermarket/big box store world of retail). 20 The voice over, as this “few bad apples” point is made, asks, “Can’t we come up with a better metaphor?” as a machine/robot plucks apples from a tree. The connection is not made, except obliquely in the section of the documentary titled “Boundary Issues” where the private property concept is discussed, between usurpations of the natural world and the genderization of a nature that is female (plundered or plunder-able, compelled to be tamed and controlled). The documentary’s many scenes of men in suits provides a replication of starkly “conventional” gender roles; its expose of the notion of “manhours” reveals how that drive to improve efficiency, combined with technological advances, results in a corporate world filled with men (later a few women) in suits who hold power, and workers, both men and women in working clothes, fighting for their fair share of power.

While this world may be filled partially now with women who try not to be men in suits and men who are resisting the norms, the corporation is, as this documentary depicts it, a type of all-encompassing monster: a Godzilla, or Frankenstein’s creation, a male monster, created by males and wielding power indiscriminately over women, men, children, and the natural world. However, the film makers never explicitly “gender” the corporation or critique the power base that is so skewed in the direction of male gendered power. At this juncture it

is important to draw the distinction here that I am not referring to power residing in legitimate, innocuous patriarchal or matriarchal relationships. Rather I am referring to a male identity resting wholly on the negative values of Power-Over, exploitation and plundering. Perhaps because both men and women benefit from this exploitation, and both women and men are exploited by corporations, the film makers did not see the connection; it is still worthwhile, nonetheless, to note that this monster in our midst came of age in male form, in a male dominant era of historical time. The documentary’s look at the “manhours” basis for industrialization –increased productivity, and, many would argue, increased misery—reveal as well that the corporation is neither “nameless” nor “faceless”\textsuperscript{21}; neither is it genderless, nor lacking residence in a dominant class.

**Conclusion**

Nearly twenty years ago, Vandana Shiva warned of the dangers posed by corporations. “Corporations,” she wrote, “use land, water and genetic resources in non-renewable, non-sustainable ways, being mainly concerned to maximize profits... .”\textsuperscript{22} What we now too blithely refer to as the ‘corporate agenda’\textsuperscript{23} has been taken up as a cause to lament and rail against by Western voices of dissent, most recently by those involved in the “Occupy” movement. The film by Joel Bakan, Jennifer Abbott, and Mark Achbar, *The Corporation*, can be included among those protesting “the corporate agenda”.\textsuperscript{24} The large-scale ecological destruction of Martin Butler’s era has only been surpassed by more recent “plunderings,” as

\textsuperscript{21} [http://truthspew.wordpress.com/tag/narragansett-bay-commission/](http://truthspew.wordpress.com/tag/narragansett-bay-commission/). Both Yahoo and Google turned up multiple references by bloggers, etc., with the phrase “nameless, faceless corporation” but I had no luck (yet) in finding the origins of "nameless faceless corporation" from either search engine. (Google 4790 hits on 12 March 2012).


\textsuperscript{23} One of the recent “Occupy” Movements, the one in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, posted this YouTube video referencing the fight against “the corporate agenda.” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5PWJgnuKFs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5PWJgnuKFs). 23 October 2011. Accessed June 2012.

\textsuperscript{24} “The Corporate Agenda” Robert Keyes quote in *The Corporation* (1/23).
Vandana Shiva and others have termed them, of the planet’s genetic resources. Through such things as “Terminator Technology” and GMO plants, animals, and fish—all life forms, but in their “synthesized,” manufactured state, owned and controlled by the corporations who have created or bought the “rights” to them—the corporation has become both an inhuman as well as relentlessly human-engineered entity.¹

Dr. Shiva’s prescient and powerful warning about the destructiveness of corporations is echoed, albeit in different measure, in both “The Peddler’s Story” and other writings by Martin Butler as well as The Corporation. Shiva’s warning—of particular significance to women and men of the Global South, who have been, and continue to be, especially hard hit by the land dispossession, environmental degradation, and cultural and seed resources-expropriations effected by Monsanto, Dow, Union Carbide and other multinational corporations—is an alarm now reverberating in both Global South and North as the ecological limits of such destructive behavior begin to be reached and breached.²⁵

This essay has highlighted only a fragment of a theoretical and historical terrain requiring further navigation, terrain related to the historical and contemporary realities of rural gender relations and identities. Many questions remain. But to close this brief inquiry, I will raise a few pointed questions on women, men, rurality and the natural world, as they connect to this matter of gender, power, and corporations. What if the natural world, as mediated through the multiplicities of rural and, importantly, but not exclusively, agricultural life, were re-valued and divorced from the values system connecting it to acquisition, development, and GDP in as many localities as possible? What if the values and aesthetics of producing for use—those all too familiar notions tied up in quilting, gardening, subsistence farming, puttin’ up food for the

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¹ “The Global North and Global South,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNPNJ0BRFLE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNPNJ0BRFLE).

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nonharvest seasons, staying out of debt, and all else, of “traditional” rural life—were to suddenly embrace an explicitly corporation-free ethic? These questions are not rhetorical. Many many people all over the world are working toward and through just these ideas and aims. And perhaps, a first step toward truly hearing women’s voices, toward hearing the voices as well of all those who are subaltern and disenfranchised, as Martin Butler and others before him and after have chronicled, and a first step toward re-balancing many issues of global concern, is to turn down the volume, historically amplified beginning in the late 19th century, of the-not “nameless, faceless,” anything but gender-less, corporation.

To be able to hear others’ voices requires turning down the volume of influence found in these corporate non-persons, who’ve been given the power to act as persons but are doing so amorally. How?—perhaps by walking away from them, in as many forms and forums as possible. While missing the opportunity to critically analyze the gendered monster the corporation was and is, The Corporation’s makers nonetheless provided moviegoers and activists with a vitally important critique and analysis of this “dominant institution.” And Bakan, Achbar and Abbott rightly perceive the fundamental “paradox” that corporations embody—that these legal ‘persons’ who are not persons at all are essentially able to legally allow some humans to oppress other humans/animals/plant life, and to hoard or to steal resources, time, energy, and harm the planet with impunity. Martin Butler, over a century ago, exposed the globalizing corporate monster—a dragon—who had taken his right arm and nearly his life as a monster, one that would play on and exploit gender roles and identities to its benefit, harming people and nature. Nevertheless, in being placed in remote and rural environs, the monster was not altogether tamed but permitted some of those chained to that monster a measure of respite through access to the restorative features of rural landscapes and community.